





*With a banner year in 2006-2007, sky's the limit for Nevada sports*

PACK ATHLETICS

# REACHES MATURITY

STORY BY DICK DAVIES • PHOTOS BY JOHN BYRNE

**S**eldom does a day go by when a small army of athletes, coaches and athletic directors does not utter those tired, trite and timeless words: “We are going to take it to the next level.”

Nevada Athletic Director Cary Groth does not resort to such worn-out cliches, but when asked to identify her goals for the next five years of Wolf Pack athletics, she says the program is indeed moving toward a higher level of competition and recognition. Her basic expectations are that each team be competitive within the Western Athletic Conference, with postseason play being the norm and not the exception. While excelling (and winning with reasonable regularity) in the conference remains the primary focus, she also has set a five-year goal of elevating the program from a regional focus to a national one. “It is time for us to become recognized across the United States as a program that can compete successfully with the top programs in the country,” she says.

Groth’s ambitious goal is compatible with the expectations of the University’s new, high-energy president, Milton Glick. A high-quality, nationally recognized athletic program is but one part of his ambitious vision for the University that anticipates competing for academic honors with the nation’s leading public universities. Glick sees the program providing positive national media exposure, as well as strengthening bonds with the alumni and community. In meetings with athletics department staff, he has made it clear he appreciates a “culture of competition,” and that he expects coaches and athletes to conduct themselves professionally “on the field, in the classroom, and in the community.”

Glick and Groth are thus of the same mind. Whether or not the program—all sports, not just a select few—make it to the elusive “next level” during the

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next five years remains to be seen. But Groth believes that the program is now positioned to do just that. The women's programs have become highly competitive within the Western Athletic Conference, with soccer, swimming and diving, and softball all garnering recent championships. And, in the past five seasons Kim Gervonsoni's arduous rebuilding effort has moved the basketball team from just three wins to 17 and a postseason National Invitation Tournament berth. The men's basketball team has enjoyed a four-year run of unparalleled success that has included four NCAA tournament victories, and a revitalized football program has earned postseason bowl bids the past two years, defeating Central Florida in 2005 and losing by one point to perennial national powerhouse Miami in 2006. The overall upward trajectory of the program is that Nevada claimed the Commissioner's Cup as the conference's top all-around performer for 2006-07. Most impressive of all is that for two years, the authoritative Penn State University-York report on the status of women's athletics has listed Nevada as best in



Photo by John Byrne

*The Wolf Pack's Jessica Wilcox leaps into teammate Aivi Luik's arms after scoring a goal against San Jose State Oct.29, 2006, as Randee Robinson looks on.*

the nation in overall compliance with federal gender equity mandates of Title IX.

Competing successfully at the national level is both exhilarating and chilling. A visit with Groth tends to make the cautious observer appreciate that it just might be possible. Thirty years ago, such expectations would have been laughable. In 1979, the move in some sports from the smaller West Coast Athletic Conference into the Big Sky Conference seemed a daunting challenge. Thirteen years later, with football, baseball and swimming-diving providing the only consistently winning programs, the Wolf Pack moved to a lower-tier Division I-A conference, the Big West. When the opportunity to join the more prestigious Western Athletic Conference presented itself in 1998, it was the University's academic quality and Reno's geographic location, not the stature of its teams, that appealed most to conference officials.

By that time, however, a fledgling "mid-major" sports program had been established on a strong foundation. The program had never been besmirched by a serious NCAA

## Groth helps Wolf Pack find its place on national landscape

By John Trent

Only a few minutes into an interview with Cary Groth, director of intercollegiate athletics at Nevada, and it's obvious that this is a woman with a plan.

"I drive the people around here crazy with my charts and graphs, but I really do think it's an important part of mapping our future," says the energetic Groth, who just completed her third season at Nevada. She shows two visitors, including Richard Davies, professor of history at the University, a chart showing the progress of Nevada's women's basketball.

"I'm probably more of a visual person," she continues. "We use charts and graphs and other things when we evaluate our coaches. Look at women's college basketball [the chart shows a number of peaks and valleys for the program since 1983]. The sport has not made the progress it needs to. But you can see that over the past four years, we're headed in the right direction. We have stability. We're on the right track. We do this for everybody, and the conversation becomes for every sport we have, 'How are we going to take it up here [her finger moves up and off the chart].'"

Groth likes to smile, and is warm and personable. Every conversation she has, with practically every visitor who comes into her office on the top floor of Legacy Hall, begins and ends with a hug. She is also accomplished, having been named to the "Super 50: Women's Sports Executives" in *Street & Smith's Sports Business Journal* as well as the recipient of the National Association of Collegiate Women's Athletic Administrators Division I Administrator of the Year award.

This is the kind of talk that this doer, this thinker, clearly relishes.

**NSB: President Milt Glick has been working on finding the proper measuring stick for the University in terms of peer institutions. Who are some of our peers in the world of collegiate athletics?**

Groth: We measure ourselves with one or two programs in the WAC, many of the schools Dr. Glick uses in academic discussions, including some Pac 10 schools — Washington State, Oregon State. Those schools that have done well athletically, on and off the field, we look to as our role models or benchmarks.

We also feel that people should be using what we do as a benchmark or a role model as well.

violation. President Joe Crowley insisted upon a strong commitment to the academic side of the program and worked closely with Athletic Director Chris Ault and the Pack PAWS booster organization to assure that the women's programs were fully funded. In 20 years at the helm, Ault raised the funds required to

provide Division I-A quality facilities. Peccole Park provided an attractive home field for Gary Powers' winning baseball program; a remodeled Virginia Street Gym did the same for Devin Scruggs' steadily improving volleyball team; Mackay Stadium was expanded to 31,545

Dick Davies, University professor of history, is considered one of the country's foremost sports historians. His most recent book is *Sports In American Life: A History* (Blackwell of London), released in 2006. Davies, a professor or an administrator at Nevada for more than 25 years, has authored 12 books, including *Main Street Blues: The Decline of Small-Town America* (named in 1998 one of the top 25 books in American history by *Choice* magazine).

seats and a modern press box and revenue-producing private suites were constructed; Cashell Field House was linked to a state-of-

the art physical training and therapy facility that ranks among the best in the nation; and Legacy Hall was constructed to house the growing administrative and coaching staffs.

The Crowley-Ault emphasis upon academic and fiscal integrity has continued under the Glick-Groth regime. Each head coach works under a contract that includes strong wording regarding compliance with NCAA regulations, academic achievement and the behavior of athletes on and off the field. Groth's files contain detailed charts tracking each program: long-term trends of team grade-point averages, graduation rates, budgets, as well as strength of schedule statistics, postseason invitations and won-loss records.

Groth emphasizes national visibility in future football schedules. This fall the Wolf Pack opens the season on the road at Nebraska and Northwestern. Back-to-back visits to football-crazed Lincoln and a Big Ten campus symbolize the national reach that Groth envisions for the entire program. "We need to have much greater visibility in the Midwest," she affirms, anticipating it will provide fertile, new recruit-

ing territory. Next year, Nevada hosts Big 12 opponent Texas Tech and travels to Missouri. In 2009, the Pack will open the season at Notre Dame and play Missouri at Mackay Stadium. Men's basketball, of course, has already moved into that rarified level in the past few years, playing road or neutral-site games against Kansas, Connecticut, Gonzaga, California and UCLA, in addition to tangling with Michigan State, Texas, Georgia Tech, Illinois and Memphis in the NCAA tournament.

This coming academic year, Groth will oversee a 17-team program with a budget of \$15.5 million. While that figure might shock those who remember the lean times of yesteryear, it is a relatively paltry amount when compared to the budgets of programs that Groth anticipates will dot future schedules. It is recognized that football ticket sales have to be substantially increased, that membership in the booster club needs to grow exponentially, and that major donors have to be cultivated. Groth is working hard on all of those fronts, acknowledging that substantially increased funding is essential to underwrite a nationally competitive program.

### **NSB: Should Nevada be in the Western Athletic Conference or the Mountain West?**

Groth: The Mountain West schools are a better fit to us institutionally, academically. They fit us better regionally, as well as competitively. The WAC is a hard conference to travel in. It's hard and it is expensive.

We have to put our athletics program and our University in the best possible position for any opportunity that's out there, whether it's in the WAC or to explore other opportunities.

**NSB: In the 1990s, the University dropped men's track. One of the reasons given then — and some institutions continue to use this reason today as they drop men's programs — was that it was a Title IX decision so that the institution could comply with Title IX guidelines (prohibiting sex discrimination in federally assisted educational programs). Does that argument still have merit today?**

Groth: Regarding Title IX and the way some institutions explain why a certain sport is dropped or added, this is something I've never understood. We reach Title IX because of the proportionality we have here [in the number of female versus male student athletes]. Nationally, studies have shown that more than 80 percent of the institutions that drop men's programs use Title IX as the reason. When really, it was just what we did when we were at Northern Illinois [Groth was the Huskies athletic director, leading her alma mater from 1994 to 2004], when we dropped

men's and women's programs . . . the bottom-line reason was we could not continue to afford to maintain all those programs. But it was easy for our AD at the time to say, "Title IX was the reason."

The unfortunate end result is that Title IX is misunderstood. Individuals end up fighting the women on Title IX. They shouldn't be fighting the women on this. They should be fighting the men's "arms race" in basketball and football going on now. That's what is costing us the money right now . . . the "arms race." You've got to pay these bigger salaries, you've got to pay these bigger benefits and these incentives, just to keep up with the Joneses. If you told me I was going to be paying a coach a half a million dollars a year to coach — and he's still underpaid — you'd have to shoot me.



Groth

**NSB: What are some of your plans for facilities in the coming years?**

Groth: When we finish the academic center [ground was broken this spring for the Margarite Petersen-E.L. Cord Academic and Athletic Performance Complex, a 7,000-square-foot academic center with counseling, study halls and a tutoring center located next to the Robert Cashell Fieldhouse], our needs will be in basketball, tennis, soccer, track and swimming. I would also like to build an

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There are exciting things currently in the works: Construction began in spring 2007 on an expansion of Cashell Fieldhouse to include an academic performance center. On the recently acquired land that once was the Manogue High School campus, the Hixson Softball Park opened March 29, and Groth is hopeful that it will soon be joined in Wolf Pack Park by a new track and field complex and an indoor-outdoor tennis facility that will provide a proper setting for the rapidly improving men's and women's teams as well as providing memberships for the northern Nevada community. She is anticipating construction of a much-needed indoor practice facility for basketball, and with pressure mounting for other uses for the Virginia Street Gym, a state-of-the-art volleyball center.

Groth is hopeful that additional programs can be established. There are currently 11 women's and seven men's sports, and she says that reinstating men's track and field, dropped as a money-saving measure in 1995, is her highest priority. She is also hopeful that men's volleyball and soccer can be added.

Many fans look to the day when Nevada and UNLV compete in the same conference. Right now, the frenetic period of conference realignment seems to have abated, but Groth is poised to make a move if the right opportunity comes along. Although she is comfortable with the far-flung Western Athletic Conference, she laments the expense and missed classes due to extensive travel (Louisiana Tech to the southeast, Hawaii to the distant west). She expresses interest in finding a conference home where Nevada would be more closely associated with comprehensive, doctoral-granting state universities that offer research-intensive academic programs. The logical move, fans suggest, would be to the Mountain West, home to the likes of New Mexico, Utah, Colorado State and yes, UNLV. Groth suggests, in all seriousness, that while the Mountain West might be the logical next stop, Nevada is actually better suited academically, geographically and athletically for membership in the Pac-10.

Now that would be taking it to the next level. 

## Two more distinctions mark a winning program

Wolf Pack athletics captured its first Commissioner's Cup, given annually to the top athletic program in the Western Athletic Conference, in 2006-07. Nevada outscored runner-up Boise State by seven points.



For the second consecutive year, Nevada also earned a best in the nation listing in providing opportunities for women in sports, according to the fourth annual Gender Equity Scorecard. The report, developed by Charles Kennedy, a senior political science instructor at Penn State University-York, ranks schools based on their compliance with the spirit and intent of Title IX, the 1972 federal law designed to give women equal opportunity in sports.

indoor and outdoor tennis facility [at the site of Christina Hixson Softball Park, formerly Bishop Manogue High School]. It's a great place for a public tennis facility, because it would be an off-campus facility. It would be four to six indoor tennis courts and eight to 12 outdoor courts, maybe done in phases. The beauty of this project is we could open it up and it could generate revenue for the program, not just for tennis, but for the athletics program.

### NSB: How would you assess attendance at Mackay Stadium?

Groth: In 2004, we averaged 9,800. In 2005, we averaged 15,200, so we made our NCAA Division I-A [attendance provision] and this year it was 16,800. Those aren't great improvements, but I'm happy with them. I think scheduling plays a huge part in this. We have a home-and-home with Texas Tech including a 2008 game at Mackay, we have a home-and-home with Missouri as they come to Reno in 2009, we're hoping to schedule a really good basketball series, a 2-for-1, with North Carolina. You've got to bring in quality opponents. We're always going to draw well for a home UNLV game.

We've changed the game times so that we don't compete with the Reno Air Races, so we don't have day games and compete with the community events.

And I'll tell you what. Chris throws a party when he coaches. That's exciting football that the team plays.

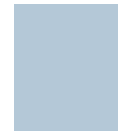
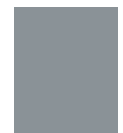
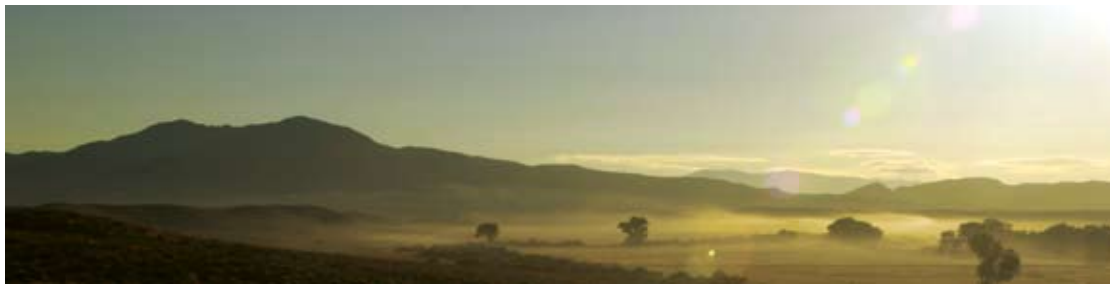
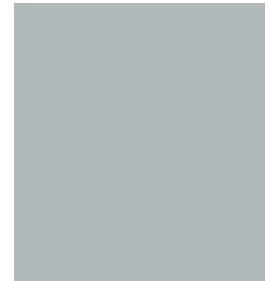
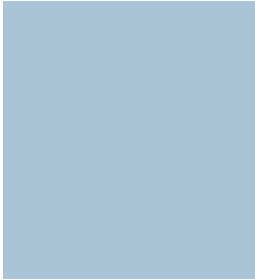
### NSB: What are your feelings about coaches' salaries? You mentioned

### an "arms race" earlier in terms of escalating coaches' salaries. Are you arming for it?

Groth: No, because I'm broke [laughs]. I think if there is anything that would drive me out of this business, it would be that. It doesn't make sense to me. There are football coaches making \$4 million annually. Why? And what does that do to the academic community?

It just doesn't make any sense to me, and it sends the wrong message to our kids, to our community, and certainly, to our faculty. We try so hard to bridge that gap, and one move like that, you can throw it all out the window.

That's the core of what we do. We forget that athletics is part of an institution of higher education. That's why our location today is so important in relation to the rest of the campus. [Groth looks out the window at all the construction for the Mathewson-IGT Knowledge Center and Joe Crowley Student Union]. This [the new academic center] will bring the academic community and athletics together in a facility that truly will be used for academics. There may be a message there, too. We designed it in such a way with the student union in mind. How does it blend? How can we welcome people to an athletic facility, so there's not all these gates, locks, and things like that. It sends a statement.



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